EERIE
Tales of the Bizarre

Eerie Tales of the Bizarre

First Edition

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A Deal of a Lifetime

Oh crap! Here comes the Boss, Bill thought to himself.

He tried to sink down further in his chair as some kind of primal, concealment instinct kicked in. Of course, it was useless; it was a chair for heaven's sake! He knew what was going to happen next. It was Friday and the Boss always left these things until the end of the week. The signs were unmistakable and he'd been seeing them every day since Monday.

Why me? Why does it have to happen to me? My money situation is really tight right now. This couldn't come at a worse time. It's embarrassing for a man of my age, to have to go through something like this. How will I face my friends if I see them?

As the Boss got closer, there was no mistaking it. It was in the eyes and he'd seen it before.

I might as well just get my stuff together and get ready to leave, he thought with a sigh.

The Boss stopped and Bill looked up until he made eye contact.

Show no fear, he kept telling himself. *Show no fear*.

He squinted his eyes slightly, bracing himself for the inevitable. Like a man who knew he was about to receive a harsh sentence, waiting for the Judge to make it official.

The Boss looked at Bill for a moment and then started to speak. "So I was thinking we should go to the Mall and do some early Christmas shopping," his wife Sheila said.

Well, the verdict was in and Bill was right. Bill's wife Sheila, or 'The Boss', as he liked to call her, was one of those people who liked to be on top of things. It was only October and she wanted to go Christmas shopping. Everyone he knew was out shopping for Halloween, but of course, 'The Boss', had done that in July. No one knew where she found plastic pumpkins in July, but she did.

Bill sighed and leaned forward in his chair so that the recliner returned to its upright position. They had been married for twenty years and this was like an annual ritual. He knew that if he tried to debate the point, that the disappointed look she would give him with those big blue eyes would ultimately result in him having to go anyway. He just stood up and went to get his car keys and overcoat.

As they walked from the house to the car, Sheila was thinking out loud about what she was going to buy for whom and how she hoped they didn't have one already. Bill on the other hand was mourning the loss of his Friday evening and hoping he didn't bump into anyone he knew at the mall.

He was a production manager at a small manufacturing company that made bookcases and other office furnishings. He spent all week in an atmosphere of loud noise and people, so the mall was the last place he wanted to spend Friday night.

By the time they arrived at the shopping center, Bill had worked himself up into frenzy. *I'm closer to sixty than I am to fifty. When am I going to be in charge of my own life? Will there ever be a time when someone isn't saying "Jump" and I'm asking, How high?*

He parked the car in the closest parking spot to the door, that he could find. He knew he would be heavily laden with packages when this torment was over and didn't want to have to carry them any farther than he had to.

As they walked closer and closer to the main entrance, he felt like a man walking those last steps up to the gallows. He had come to grips with the fact that this was going to happen and there was nothing he could do about it.

Probably like every condemned man taking their final few steps he thought, *I would give anything if I could change my life so I was in control.*

As they neared the entrance the doors opened automatically and the noise from inside hit him like a blast of cold air. He turned his shoulder into it and trudged ahead.

His duties were the same every year and he knew them well. He was to find a central staging area and wait there. Sheila would go from shop to

shop getting all the stuff on her list. Periodically she would drop off a load and he would take it out to the car.

"I'll be right here," he said, having spotted an unoccupied bench near the center court.

Sheila looked up from the piece of paper she had in her hand.

"Okay, I won't be long," she said and tossed him a smile.

Of course, what seemed like a few minutes to her felt like an eternity for Bill so he made himself as comfortable as he could on the hard bench. He hadn't been there long, when a well-dressed man, about his age, came over and sat on the other end of the bench. Bill had no interest in striking up a conversation so he continued to stare at the floor.

"I could be at home watching the game right now," the well-dressed man began, as if trolling for some sympathy. "Why does she do this to me every year?" the man continued.

Now that statement grabbed Bill's interest. This guy seemed to be in a similar predicament. Perhaps Bill had found an ally to help pass the time. Bill sat up and looked at the man. He had neatly trimmed silver-gray hair, small inconspicuous glasses and was wearing a nice suit.

"Wife shopping for Halloween?" Bill asked.

"No… Christmas!" was the man's exasperated response.

Bill had to chuckle at that.

"Yeah, mine too," he said offering the man what little sympathy he hadn't already used on himself.

Finally, someone who would fully understand his plight. He didn't feel so alone and manipulated anymore and took an instant liking to the stranger.

"My name's Bill." He held out his hand.

"I'm Stan," the man replied with a smile and returned a firm handshake.

Bill noticed the man was wearing a very expensive gold watch and the hand he was shaking had a strange gold ring on it. It looked like a goat's head with twisted horns and tiny red rubies for eyes. It was comforting to know that even men of wealth had to endure things like this as well.

Something behind Stan caught Bills eye. There was a slim man, looking at the back of Stan's head and stretching around as if trying to get a peak at his face. When he finally did, a look of stark horror filled the man's eyes and he looked directly at Bill and began shaking his head quickly from side to side as if to say, "No! No." Stan noticed Bill's preoccupation and began turning around to see what he was looking at. The slim man quickly turned away and began walking as fast as he could, without running.

Before Bill could even imagine what that was all about, Stan interrupted his thoughts.

"Hey, there's a new electronics shop right over there. They have TVs on display. We could go and watch the game in there."

What an excellent idea! Bill thought. *Sheila won't be back for at least half an hour.*

"Sure, that sounds good," Bill replied to his new friend.

The two men found a nice big screen TV on display in the new shop and pretended to be evaluating its quality while watching the hockey game.

"You know it doesn't have to be like this Bill," Stan began. "You can be in charge of your own affairs and never have to do anything you don't want to ever again."

Oh great, thought Bill. *This guy is a salesman of some sort and he's just trying to sell me something.*

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you selling Stan?" Bill asked, disappointed that the man he thought of as an ally was another parasite trying to feed off of his misery.

"I'm not selling anything. I'm just saying that if a man takes charge of his own destiny, he needn't worry about others making any decisions for him. Do you remember those Friday night poker games you used to go to just after you were married?"

The picture on the big screen TV suddenly changed and there was Bill with his buddies, just as they were twenty years ago at one of their weekly poker games. Laughing, drinking beer and smoking big, smelly cigars while

a football game played on the radio in the background. There was Paul, Bill's best friend back then. He could keep Bill laughing for hours.

Those were good times, Bill thought to himself. *Too bad Paul died so young*. *Wait a minute!* he gave his head a quick shake and looked at the TV again. The hockey game was back on. *Did I just imagine that?*

Have we met before?" Bill asked Stan, "And how did you know about the poker games?"

"Paul told me," was the unexpected response from Stan.

"Paul's been dead for over ten years now," Bill said. "How could you have remembered something so trivial for that long?"

"Actually, I talked to him this morning," was Stan's even more shocking response.

Bill blinked hard. He had been a casket-bearer at his friend's funeral so he knew that was impossible.

"Okay just what the hell are you playing at?" Bill turned to face Stan head on.

"It's okay Bill. Calm down and I'll tell you everything. I'm not really here shopping with my wife. I was sent here because my boss picked up on your offer to do anything in order to regain control of your life?"

It's only been ten minutes since I had that fleeting thought. This is absurd. Bill struggled to make sense out of what Stan was saying.

"So what, you're like an Angel?" Bill used as sarcastic a tone as he could.

"Actually I play for the other team," Stan admitted. Paul is a guest of ours. He talks about you often and I can tell he misses you a lot."

"So Paul's in Hell?" Bill asked, still in that sarcastic tone. "He lead a good life. Why would he be there?"

"Well actually, he stole a cordless drill from a company he worked for once and that qualified him for the first level. I'm afraid people have been lying to you Bill about what Hell is. Hell has many levels and sure, we have a special place for mass-murderers, child molesters and people like that,

where it's anything but pleasant, but there's more to it than that. When you die, do you want to go to heaven and listen to harp music all day long? Just sit around on fluffy clouds talking about love and peace?"

Bill had never thought about that before and it did sound kind of boring. "Go on," he said.

"We have a special place for people like you and Paul," Stan said as he motioned toward the TV.

On the screen was Paul; sitting at a table with two other men; laughing, drinking beer and smoking big cigars. Behind each of them was a scantily clad, voluptuous, young woman holding a tray with many different kinds of drinks and snacks on it.

"This is where people go who don't quite fit the standard definition of good and evil. It's where men who like war documentaries, gambling, swearing, and the subtle curves of a beautiful woman's body go. These are hardly things that would warrant an eternity of torment but God doesn't want people like that up there either. It would be distracting to the people who clearly fall within the boundaries of good, god-fearing folk. Do you see what I mean?"

Bill didn't know what to say. He just looked back at the TV and marveled at how happy those guys looked. Next to Paul was an empty chair.

"Paul's been saving you that chair since he got there," Stan said. "He won't let anyone else sit in it."

"So what's the deal?" Bill asked finally. "You want me to kill myself so I can go play poker with Paul?"

Stan laughed aloud. "Actually, if you killed yourself, that would qualify you for the third level, where there is only light beer and you play poker for all eternity but never win a hand. Just kidding. No actually, it's a pretty sweet deal. We will guarantee you another twenty years of life after which you will die peacefully in your sleep. For those twenty years, you will have all the money you need and not have to answer to anyone. You will be in complete control of what you do and when you do it. All you have to do is agree to become a guest of ours after that time and you and Paul can play cards, watch sports, nap on the couch, whatever you want for all eternity."

“Why me?” Bill was curious.

“Well, the first level is not like the rest of hell. You have to want to go there. We can’t drag you there kicking and screaming. My Boss heard your offer, that you would do anything to improve your life, so he thought you would be a good candidate. Besides, Paul has been requesting this for quite some time now. The choice is yours Bill. You can slug it out for another 5 years after which you will die of a heart attack from the stress and go to heaven where its more of the same do this and don’t do that. Or you can be guaranteed 20 more years of the kind of life you have dreamed of and spend an eternity doing the things you love most.”

Bill looked at the TV again. Paul had just won a huge pot and the young woman with the skimpy top was lighting his cigar.

“Sign me up!” Bill said.

“Excellent! Stan said as he clapped his hands together once. There’s just one little detail we have to contend with.”

“What’s that?” Bill waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Well technically you don’t qualify for the first level yet because you’ve led too good of a life.” Stan explained. “You’ve never cheated anyone, you’ve never stolen anything, and I can’t believe it but you’ve never even told a lie.”

“So now what?” Bill asked, afraid that yet another opportunity was going to slip between his fingers.

“We just need you to do something a little naughty. Steal one of these ten dollar DVDs for instance and walk out that door and you’re in.”

Stan was right. Bill had never stolen anything in his life, even as a kid. The idea was totally foreign to him. But this was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Bill picked up one of the DVD’s and looked at it. He glanced up and around to see that no one was looking and casually slipped it into the large pocket on the side of his coat. He stood there for a second, then headed for the door.

As he exited the store and entered the center court of the Mall, his hands were shaking and he felt light-headed. He expected a store clerk or security

guard to descend upon him at any moment, but no one did. He returned to his spot on the bench and looking around, wondered where Stan had gone.

"There you are!" he heard Sheila say. He looked up to see her smiling face and armload of bags.

"Would you take these out to the car please? I'm almost finished."

Bill was happy to. After all, this was the last time he was going to have to do this. He took the bags from her and then noticed something different about her face. It looked pale. Just then, Sheila reached up with her left hand and grabbed her coat in the center of her chest. The fingers of her hand squeezed the material into a crumpled ball in her hand. Her face contorted as if she was in excruciating pain. She reached out for something to steady herself on with her right hand but there was nothing there. She collapsed to the floor still holding her chest. Bill immediately dropped all the bags he was holding and knelt beside her.

"Sheila!" … "Sheila!" he yelled but she was unconscious. "Help!" Bill hollered, and looked around.

Two security guards came running from opposite directions.

"My wife's having a heart attack!" Bill looked up at them with desperation in his eyes.

One security guard began giving CPR to Sheila while his partner produced a cell-phone and called 911. Bill looked at his unconscious wife, lying on the floor.

Why did this have to happen now? Just when things were going to get so much better. Then it occurred to him. This was Stan's solution to Bill's dilemma. With Sheila gone, Bill would be free to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted to. The insurance policies that Bill and Sheila had taken out on each other would ensure that he had all the money he needed for the next 20 years. *No!* Bill thought. *No, this isn't what I wanted!* All of a sudden the thought of living the rest of his life, however long it was, without Sheila made it seem empty and worthless no matter how much money or freedom he had. Sure he hated these little shopping trips but Sheila was such a big part of his life, with her gone, he would be only half a person.

In desperation Bill stood up and looked around. Stan was no where to be seen. So he yelled as loud as he could, “The deals off! I want no part of it!”

People were looking at him but he didn’t care. *This is all my fault!* he thought as the ambulance sirens became louder and louder. *Why did I have to screw with things? Life with Sheila has been wonderful for the past twenty years and all I could think about was how inconvenient these shopping trips were. What a fool I am!*

The paramedics were rushing through the entrance with a stretcher in tow. Sheila was still lying on the floor, her blue eyes wide open and her red lipstick smeared by the paramedic who had begun mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on her.

Bill put his hands in his pockets nervously and felt the stolen DVD. *Why did I have to steal this? If I didn’t, none of this would be happening.* Then it occurred to him; perhaps that was a way to break the deal. He knew what he had to do.

The paramedics were unpacking the defibrillator as Bill rushed back to the electronics store. He cut in front of a woman who was buying a clock radio at the checkout and looked at the young teller.

“I was in here a while ago and I guess I absentmindedly put this DVD in my pocket and walked out of the store without paying for it. I’m very sorry.”

“That’s okay,” replied the girl behind the counter, with a big smile. “Actually that happens quite often. Thank you for your honesty.”

Bill looked back over his shoulder just as the jolt from the defibrillator caused Sheila’s body to lurch upward.

“Nothing!” he heard the paramedic report.

Why didn’t that work? The store had the DVD back that should have broken the deal. Then he realized that sure, the store had the DVD back, but it didn’t change the fact that he had stolen it in the first place. His mind was racing. Time was running out.

“Okay,” he said to the clerk cutting off the female customer again, “Actually, I put it in my pocket and walked out of the store on purpose. I

meant to steal this thing and I'm very, very sorry."

He pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket and put it on top of the DVD. The clerk's expression changed to a much more serious one. The older female customer he kept cutting off looked at him in disgust.

"A man of your age, stealing when you obviously had enough money to pay for it," She said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He was ashamed all right. More ashamed of himself than anyone could imagine.

Then he heard the paramedic shout, "I've got a rhythm!

Bill left the money and the DVD on the counter and rushed back to his wife's side. They were loading her onto the stretcher when he arrived. Her eyes were closed now and her face was getting it's color back as he grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. She smiled but couldn't speak. She weakly squeezed his hand back. They wheeled her to the waiting ambulance and Bill followed. Rushing past the pile of bags, he had dropped minutes earlier and through the main entrance.

The deal had been broken. As he rode in the ambulance, beside his beloved Sheila, Bill reflected on how he was deliriously happy to have his life back. A life that only a short time ago, he was trying to bargain away. *How could I have been so blind and so stupid?*

It was almost a year to the day after that tragic event. Sheila had fully recovered and the doctors were still baffled by what had caused her heart attack in the first place. They had suggested that maybe she should slow down and not worry so much about trying to stay three steps ahead of everything. She was sitting on the couch watching TV when Bill walked up and sat beside her. She clicked the TV off with the remote and turned to face him with a smile.

"Would you like me to go out and pick up some stuff for Halloween?" he asked her.

She thought for a minute and replied, "We still have a couple weeks left, there's no rush."

“What would you like to do this evening then? I could go out and pick up some Chinese food and a movie and we could just curl up on the couch?” he suggested.

“That sounds like heaven,” she said.

Bill thought, *Yes…. Yes it does.*

The Seance

Mable drew the sacred symbols on the backs of her hands with a red ballpoint pen. The stylized M with an arrowhead on the last elongated leg for Scorpio, her sign. On the other hand, an arrow pointing up and to the right on a 45 degree angle with a shorter line bisecting the shaft for Sagittarius; the birth sign of her deceased husband John.

Tonight she hoped five years of torment would come to an end. Who had murdered her husband so long ago? The police investigation found nothing. They had no idea who fired the single, fatal shot through John's heart, with the pistol he kept in the back shed where his body was found. They had ruled out suicide because the gun had been fired from at least ten feet away. The killer left the pistol on the floor of the shed and that's where the trail ended.

For so long Mable, now sixty years old, had wrestled with the mystery. John, who was sixty-two when he was murdered, was very well liked by everyone. His wallet and anything of value in the small building he died in had been left untouched.

Mable turned her palms over and drew the symbol for Mercury. A circle with a foreshortened U on top and a cross on the bottom; the basic energy pattern for communication. Tonight she would get the answers from John himself. With the help of three friends and a powerful Medium known only as Zoltan, Mable hoped to contact the afterlife and find the answers she so desperately needed.

The seance was to be held at her friend Ester's house for the simple reason that Ester was the only one who had a round dining room table. It would be easier for the four women and Zoltan to join hands in a magic circle that would open a portal to the *other side*. Once opened, the portal would allow them to communicate with the loved ones they had all lost in recent years. Mable's quest was only one. Each of her friends had loved ones they wanted to contact and say a final parting word or have burning questions answered.

Mable dawned a pair of short black gloves so the symbols would not be visible to the other people on the bus. She put on her coat and picked up the large heavy purse she always carried. On her way to the bus stop, every step she took seemed to conjure up a new feeling in her as she contemplated what they were about to do. Fear and anxiety were the most prevalent but she knew she had to do this if she ever wanted to find peace.

She got off the bus and began walking the half block from the bus stop to Ester's house. Ester was older than her at sixty five years of age. Small in stature, with older style glasses and hair she kept colored dark. She was a grouchy, surly little woman that Mable had known for years. Ester had been hard of hearing for as long as Mable could remember, but would never admit it. Instead, she was always blaming other people for not talking loud enough.

She too had lost her husband two years previous. Ester had received a disturbing phone call from him on the morning of his death.

“I’m having an affair with the love of my life,” he had said. “You might be lonely but you’ll have to live without me.”

Ester had slammed the telephone down in a fit of rage. Later that day, her husband succumbed to a heart attack and she had never been able to confront him about this. That was Ester’s quest. To find out why after so many years of marriage, he would do something so cruel to her.

Mable arrived in front of the house at the same time as Agnes, who lived just down the street in the other direction.

“Hello,” Agnes gave a little wave as they neared each other, “isn’t this exciting!” Agnes exclaimed, the childlike enthusiasm bubbling through in her voice.

Agnes was one of those people who were always way too happy. She had just turned sixty-two but sure didn’t look it. She was quite tall and slim; her hair still blonde with big blue eyes and fit as a fiddle. Her objective tonight was to contact her cat, which had tragically died only a few short weeks ago. Agnes had left the door open a crack while she went out to retrieve her newspaper one morning. The cat followed her outside and wandered onto the street where he was run over and killed by a garbage

truck. It had been devastating to Agnes. Having never married and being alone most of the time, that cat was the most important thing in the world to her. She took it everywhere she went, like some small, furry child. But being Agnes she had quickly come to grips with the cat's death and now eagerly anticipated the opportunity to once again call his name.

They proceeded to the house together and rang the buzzer. Doreen, the fourth member of their group, greeted them at the door. She was the oldest at seventy years of age. A tiny woman with glasses and silver hair, who took quick tiny steps wherever she went. The sweetest lady you could ever hope to meet but the years were taking their toll. She had never been the brightest light in the chandelier and since her husband died last year, her memory had started failing as well. She was so sweet though, you couldn't help but love her.

She had been married to her husband for over fifty years and no one could ever remember an argument or an angry word exchanged between the two. She too had a burning question she wanted to ask of her deceased husband but no one knew what it was yet as she was very shy and private about anything to do with their relationship.

"Is Zoltan here yet?" Mable asked Doreen as the two women entered the house and removed their coats.

"No just Ester and I," was the reply from Doreen.

The three women chose positions around the dining room table as Ester continued to walk quickly from plant to plant in her home, giving them a quick spritz with her spray bottle.

"Did everyone write the symbols on the backs of your hands like I told you to?" Mable asked as she set her heavy purse on the floor next to her chair.

Mable had been the driving force in this whole idea after having read a book on contacting the dead. She realized that it would be the only way to find the answers she was searching for. She couldn't do it by herself though, so she had convinced her three friends that they could use this seance to find peace as well. It was Mable who had located Zoltan and requested his

help in a letter outlining their objectives. He was rumored to be the most powerful Medium in the city.

Agnes, smiling as always, displayed the back of her hands for Mable to see. Mable examined them and the symbols were present as instructed, but with little happy faces drawn beside them. Mable began wondering if the rest of the group was as committed to this experiment as she was.

“Doreen, let me see your hands,” Mable commanded.

Doreen placed her hands on the table palms down so Mable could see the backs. One hand was blank and on the other was written, “Bread, Milk, Butter, Bread, Juice, Bread.”

“I couldn’t remember what I was supposed to put there,” Doreen explained in her quiet little voice. You just couldn’t get mad at Doreen. So sweet, so innocent. Mable gave a heavy sigh and removed the red pen from her large purse. She steadied Doreen’s hand with her own and prepared to draw the symbol for her, on the back of the hand that was blank.

“Okay, when is your birthday?” she asked Doreen.

Doreen’s face took on a blank stare. She turned to look at Agnes who was trying to hold back a grin.

“I’m sorry I don’t remember when your birthday is dear,” Agnes said with regret.

Then Doreen’s face lit up as she finally remembered.

“Its February the thirtieth she announced,” proud at having remembered it all by herself.

Mable was trying to remember what the sign for that month was. At about the same time she realized that February never has thirty days, she heard the door buzzer sound loud and long.

“I’ll get it!” Doreen announced, pulling her hand away from Mable and scooting off to see who was there.

The creature that greeted Doreen when she swung open the door would make anyone’s blood run cold; except Doreen’s of course.

“Come in young man,” they heard Doreen tell the latest arrival.

Mable had never seen Zoltan and her heart quickened as she heard the heavy footsteps on the hardwood floor as they approached the dining room area. What walked into view caused Mable to gasp and the seriousness of what they were about to do finally registered.

Zoltan was a giant of a man nearly seven feet tall with a heavy muscular build. He was dressed entirely in black from head to toe and except for streaks of Grey, the long unkept hair that reached well past his shoulders was jet black as well. The tattoos on his face were also done in black. Strange symbols adorned his forehead, both cheeks and the front of his chin, extending a short way down his throat. They framed two steely looking eyes, also very dark, that felt like swords through her soul when he looked at Mable.

He towered over tiny Doreen who looked up at him.

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” she asked.

Zoltan had to bend his head straight down to look a Doreen and didn’t answer. He raised his head and stared for an instant at the other two ladies seated at the table.

“There are rules that must be followed strictly and without question if you are to do this safely and successfully,” he announced.

The ladies had never heard a voice as deep as that in their lives. It almost seemed to emanate from the floorboards and although it was a small room, still seemed to echo slightly.

“Doreen, sit down!” Mable commanded.

“Ester we’re starting,” Doreen called in a cheery tone as she hurried back to her chair.

Ester who had still been watering her plants squeezed past Zoltan and sat in one of the two unoccupied chairs.

“I’m not retarded!” she looked at Doreen. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“WE’RE STARTING!” Doreen repeated in as loud a voice as she could, to make sure Ester could hear.

“Well speak up next time!” Ester scolded. She turned and looked up at Zoltan, “I hope you wiped your feet,” she said as she set the spray bottle on the floor next to her chair.

Mable was clearly embarrassed at the flippant behavior of her cohorts and asked Zoltan to continue. Zoltan sat in the last remaining unoccupied chair. Even sitting down, he would have been taller than any of the four women had they been standing.

“We will begin the ritual by all joining hands,” Zoltan began. “I will meditate while you calm your minds with a mantra. It is the first syllable of the Sanskrit Prayer of Mercy and is done by closing your eyes, relaxing your body and making this sound, Oommmmm. Let me hear you.”

The women all chanted, “Oommmmm.”

“Excellent!” Zoltan said and then continued, “This will open the portal to the hereafter and my consciousness shall pass through. Once there, I can be used as a conduit through which you may speak to your loved ones. When the portal has been established you need no longer hold hands and may each in turn call out the name of whom you are trying to contact. You will then have a short time to converse with them through me. Do you understand?” he asked the ladies and they all nodded that they did. “The most important thing that you must remember is that when the ritual is concluded, you must allow me ten minutes to slowly bring my consciousness back through the portal. To do so too quickly, is not only very painful, it is very dangerous. The portal is centered inside the sacred symbols around my face and the area they enclose must never be touched by anything foreign to me, as it will immediately break the connection. Do you understand?” he asked again and they all nodded that they did. “Excellent!” he repeated. “Then we shall begin.”

Zoltan stretched out his giant left hand to Agnes and his right one to Ester. The ladies all joined hands to close the circle. Zoltan relaxed his body and closed his eyes. The ladies all closed their eyes and relaxed and began their mantra:

“Oommmmmm, Oommmmmm,” they repeated.

Zoltan's body suddenly stiffened and his eyes flew open to lock in a blank stare straight ahead. Mable, who was the only one who knew sort of what to expect, realized that the portal had indeed been opened. Her heart pounded, it was too late to turn back now.

The ladies had decided earlier on the order in which they would talk to their dearly departed. It would be based on age with the oldest going first. That meant Doreen would be first, followed by Ester then Agnes and finally Mable.

"Go ahead Doreen, call out to you husband," Mable whispered.

"Bill?" Doreen began in her quiet timid voice, "Bill Martin?" she said again.

Zoltan's eyes rolled back in their sockets and his head began slowly turning first to one side then the other. His lips parted and a voice came out which sounded nothing like Zoltan's.

"You will die the death of a thousand tortures!" the voice boomed.

"Bill?" Doreen asked.

Silence reined for a second or two then the voice returned.

"I'm sorry, I thought you said Phil."

The women all held their breath and then there it was. Clear as a bell. The voice of Bill, Doreen's late husband,

"I'm here Doreen."

"Oh Bill," Doreen said, "I've missed you so much. Are you okay? Are you in pain? I need to know something."

"No I'm doing very well considering," Bill's voice replied. "What's the trouble honey?"

"Ask your question," Mable instructed. Speared on by this success she was getting anxious for her turn. Doreen steadied herself.

"Where's the fuse box for the basement light?" Silence again. Doreen continued, "Whenever I go into the basement from the kitchen, its very dark and no matter where I go I'm bumping into things."

Bills voice returned, “Sweetie, we don’t have a basement dear. That’s actually a closet you’re going into there.”

“Are you sure?” Doreen asked.

“Yup pretty sure,” was the response, “but I have to go. Phil’s wife is trying to contact him. I love you dear,” his voice trailed off.

“I love you too Bill!” Doreen called after it.

Mable couldn’t believe what she had heard. She looked at Doreen for a moment and blinked hard. "A closet?” was all she could say.

Doreen giggled, giddy with having heard Bill’s voice again.

Zoltan’s face had resumed its blank stare and it was Ester’s turn to confront her husband about his indiscretions and cruel phone call.

“Fred Simmons,” she began and then louder, “Fred Simmons”

Again, Zoltan’s eyes rolled back and his lips parted.

“I’m here Ester,” Fred’s voice responded.

“Yes, the hereafter,” Ester said, “I’m looking for Fred Simmons.”

“I’M HERE ESTER” the voice repeated, louder so she could hear him.

“Well speak up next time!” she scolded the voice of her ex-husband, then realizing she had contacted him, blurted out, “You son-of-a-bitch! I’ve waited two years to call you that!”

“What’s the problem Hun?” the voice sounded confused.

“Don’t play dumb! Let me jog your memory. Do you remember your last phone call to me? You said, ‘I’m having an affair with the love of my life. You might be lonely but you’ll have to live without me.’

The voice sighed, “I said I BOUGHT A FUR FOR MY BEAUTIFUL WIFE. I’LL BE HOME LATE SO YOU’LL HAVE TO EAT WITHOUT ME!”

“A fur coat?” Ester asked already feeling the guilt well up inside her.

“Yes dear, it’s probably still in the trunk of the car,” the voice trailed off.

Overcome with emotion Ester yelled, “I’m sorry Fred!”

She leapt to her feet throwing her arms around Zoltan.

“ESTER, NO!” Mable yelled but it was too late.

Ester planted a kiss on Zoltan’s cheek clearly inside the forbidden zone that must never be touched.

Zoltan’s eyes blinked twice and then his entire body started shaking uncontrollably. The searing pain of having one’s soul dragged back through countless dimensions and then slamming back into the body from which it originated was plainly reflected in the tortured and grimacing expression on Zoltan’s face. His body stopped shaking and his head slumped forward with his hands dangling by his side. The girls stared at him for a moment.

“Okay, my turn,” Agnes said in her cheery, bubbly voice as the ladies again took Zoltan's hands, closing the circle, and began reciting Oommmmmm. Zoltan’s body again stiffened and his head jerked upwards so his back was poker straight and the blank look again descended on his face, which had a large crocodile like tear running down his cheek.

“The portal is open. Call your cat Agnes”, Mable said.

“Mr. Goober,” Agnes began, and then louder, “Mr. Goober.”

Zoltan’s tear-filled eyes again disappeared so only the whites were visible. His lips parted and a strange intermittent noise, which sounded unworldly yet strangely familiar, emanated from between them.

“That’s him!” Agnes said in a cracking, emotional voice. “That’s what it sounded like when he was licking himself.”

She began scratching the back of Zoltan’s head and the strange noise changed to the sound of a cat purring.

“Awe…I miss you Mr. Goober and I’m sorry.” Agnes began, her eyes welling up with tears. “ It was my fault that you got out of the house and run over by that truck.”

Zoltan’s body all of a sudden leaned forward and every muscle tensed up. His back became arched and a hideous sickening noise that sounded like it originated in the depths of Hell itself came out of his mouth, followed by what sounded like someone or something trying to speak but being unable to.

“Ack,” it began. Then louder and more pronounced, “AACCKK!”

Zoltan’s face became a bright red and his white eyes looked as though they could pop out of his head at any moment. Agnes began slapping Zoltan on the back.

“Yup, he’s always had trouble with the hairballs.”

“HERE!” Ester yelled. “Not on my good table you don’t!”

Zoltan’s reddened puffy face turned toward Ester and he projected a loud hissing noise in her direction. Ester instinctively picked up the water bottle beside her chair and pointed it at Zoltan’s face.

“Damn cat!”

She began squeezing the trigger…Spritz, Spritz, Spritz. The spray struck Zoltan inside the forbidden zone and his consciousness was again brought careening back through the spirit world. Shredded and bruised it came crashing back into his physical body. The pain was akin to having your intestines removed through your nose as every nerve ending in his body screamed out in agony. This time, he slumped back in the chair. His arms hung loosely by his side and his head lay back with his eyes facing the ceiling. His body twitching with intermittent spasms. The ladies stared at him for a moment.

“Okay, it’s my turn!” Mable declared, her impatience finally getting the best of her.

The women quickly joined hands with Zoltan, closing the circle and began chanting.

“Oommmmm, Oommmmm.”

Zoltan’s body again lurched forward, to its poker-straight position. His face again dawned a blank stare, with tears flowing freely down both cheeks now and his bottom lip quivering.

“John?” Mable called out. “Jonathan Blake?”

A long pause ensued and then, there was his voice.

“I’m here Mabel.”

Even after 5 years, Mable would know it anywhere.

“Oh John, it’s so good to hear your voice again. Who killed you John? Who took you away from me? What happened the day you were murdered?”

John’s voice began, “It’s kind of hazy but I remember I was going to clean my gun in the back shed. I had set it on the work bench while I went to the back of the shed to get some fresh rags.” He paused as if thinking. “I remember now. I heard a noise behind me so I looked back toward the gun and there he was, staring at me. I’d hated him for years and I knew that somehow it was going to end right there, right then. He was closer to the gun than I was, so I grabbed an axe handle with every intention of caving his head in.”

“Who John? Who was it?” Mable could wait no longer.

“That squirrel that kept eating my tomatoes,” was John’s unexpected reply. “He saw me coming, ran along the workbench, knocked the gun to the floor and it went off. The bullet hit me in the chest and the last thing I saw was that squirrel running through the door toward my garden.”

Mable couldn’t believe her ears. Five years she had harbored a searing hatred for the murderer that had taken her husband and it was a squirrel!

“YOU IDIOT!!” she screamed. Jumping to her feet, she swung the heavy purse beside her chair with all her might. The bag struck Zoltan square in the face and knocked both him and the chair over backwards.

As Mable put on her coat, she still couldn’t believe it. Agnes and Doreen were talking something about cookies and double boilers while Ester was hunting frantically for the keys to the trunk of the car.

They followed the paramedics through the front door as they wheeled Zoltan to the waiting ambulance. His long legs hanging over the end of the stretcher. His hands flailing away in the air as if a swarm of flies were tormenting him.

As Mabel turned toward her buss stop she heard Doreen saying, “Yes I think I have one at home, in the basement.”

A Test of Humanity

Pshhssssstt…! *Ah Saturday* Randy thought to himself as he let out a sigh while pulling the tab on his fourth can of beer. The best day of the week. He had the place to himself, because his wife had taken their daughter to the mall for some 'quality time together', as she did every weekend. The weather was warm and sunny and there were no chores to be done, because he had made a point of finishing them all during the week.

He moved his right leg to the side so it was hanging out of the hammock and turned his attention back to the basketball game he was watching. He turned the volume up slightly on the small TV that was perched precariously upon his round tummy, so that he could hear it above the sound of a distant lawn mower.

He was carrying out a ritual practiced by millions of middle aged, male, blue collar workers all over the world. The lying down, drinking beer and watching of sports on Saturday. It was a rite much revered by multitudes of men like Randy and he was proud to be a part of it.

Sip after sip he savored the bubbly beverage as he watched the game and thought about absolutely nothing. Tipping the beer can upside down, he shook the last remaining drops onto his outstretched tongue. He then gave the can one more appreciative look before crushing it in his hand and throwing it in a high arc toward a small pail, with a tiny basket ball hoop supported above it. The can struck the little backboard behind the hoop and bounced sideways, landing on the ground beside the other three cans that lay there crushed and lifeless.

“Damn!” Randy said under his breath. Frustrated at not having scored one 'beer can basket' so far that afternoon.

He was reaching for another beer from the cooler, conveniently located beside and slightly under his hammock, when the picture on his television suddenly went blank. Shortly after, the sound disappeared as well.

“Awe great!” he said, as he started frantically pulling the antennae this way and that trying to reacquire a signal.

A dark shadow passing over his face caused him to stop fussing with the TV and look skyward. A triangular shaped vessel, briefly covering the sun as it slowly moved above him was casting the shadow. Upon closer inspection, Randy saw that there were actually twelve of them.

Before coming to any snap conclusions, he did a quick mental count of the number of beers he had consumed so far that day and looked to the ground beside his garbage pail for confirmation.

He tried to look up towards the strange vessels again. The sun, which had been concealed behind one of the ships, emerged and made it impossible to see skyward because it was too bright. When another of the strange vessels moved into a position where it was obscuring the sun’s rays, he could again take a curious look upward.

They were mostly silhouettes because of the bright sun behind them, but Randy could make out some details in the ships that were off to one side. They were shaped like long triangles, dark gray or black in color and were moving much slower than any plane could, without falling from the sky. They made no discernible noise except for an occasional sound that was similar to static sparks in rapid succession.

The ships were not perfectly flat on the bottom. They had some oddly shaped, raised areas surrounding what looked like a small glass porthole. Again the sun emerged from behind the slowly moving vessel and Randy was forced to look away. When he felt the shadow of yet another ship crossing his face, he looked up again, determined this time to gather as much information about the crafts as he could before the sun made looking up difficult.

He was surprised and a bit disturbed upon looking up this time. The ship that was currently blocking the sun’s blinding rays, had stopped moving. The other eleven ships were continuing onward at the same pace. In one sense, this was good as it gave Randy some extra time to examine this strange vehicle in more detail. On the other hand, this one was now directly above his hammock and making him nervous.

Without warning, a beam extended from the small porthole shaped object at the bottom of the ship. It was similar to a laser beam in that it was extremely coherent and focused to a very small point. The only difference was that it was black in color. It could best be described as a beam of 'dark'.

The black beam extended from the bottom of the ship above Randy and terminated in the center of his forehead with a tiny black dot. No sooner had the beam made contact with his head, then Randy could feel a strange calming sensation and was aware of a 'presence' in his mind.

“I am Thul Nor,” the presence said. “What name are you known by?”

“I’m Randy,” he thought automatically.

He found himself wondering who these being were and what they wanted.

“We are from a distant world,” the voice began as if sensing Randy’s questions. “We are expanding our empire into this section of the galaxy. Your planet could be very useful to us but we are concerned by what we have seen of your race. A decision has to be made whether to bring you into our empire as a companion species, or eradicate you entirely and just use the resources of your world. You have been chosen as one of twelve inhabitants, who will argue the case for the rest of your kind. Do you, Ran Dee, agree to answer our questions willingly and truthfully?”

Randy didn’t know why he of all people had been chosen for this. He did sense from the presence in his mind, that if he were to refuse, they would just count that as one vote for eradication. He would have to rise to the occasion. He, as a member of a team of twelve, would have to give one hundred and ten percent and represent the human race. Like the captain of the 'Earth Team' at some kind of Interstellar Olympics, he would lead the team to victory with dignity and honor, on behalf of human beings everywhere!

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Thul Nor said to Randy's mind. “The first question is this: Why do humans make war on each other to such a great degree?”

Randy considered his answer carefully. *This is like the playoffs,* he thought to himself. When he was convinced he had formulated the perfect

answer, he took his shot.

“We sometimes make war to gain more territory for our group of people as our world is only so big. We also make war on others if we deem them to be a threat, before they have a chance to make war on us. Thirdly, wars are sometimes caused by different beliefs or religions.”

Randy was pleased with his answer and thought he had truthfully covered all the reasons why man makes war. In his head, he went over what he’d said again and realized that it didn’t make us sound very good at all. Now he began to worry about his answer. Maybe he should have said something which tried to justify the making of war so the human race didn’t look so brutal. He desperately wanted to change his answer but it was too late. Thul Nor had already begun asking the second question.

“What is this... 'religion' you speak of?” was the second question for Randy to face.

He would take his time on this one and do a better job. He wasn’t very religious and never had been. He wasn’t really sure what religion was himself so how could he make it sound good when describing it to others.

After a long thought process, he slowly and deliberately described, to the presence in his head, what he believed religion to be.

“Different religions involve different beliefs held by different groups of people, regarding how life should be lived; which kind of all powerful entity oversees our lives; and how we will be punished by these entities if we don’t live our lives the way we should.”

He thought about what he’d said for a minute and then mentally nodded his head. Ya that’s it. That’s what religion is. *Wait a minute*, he thought. He’d used the word '*different'* three times in one sentence. *These guys are going to think that we aren’t a united species and are incapable of living together. Damn!* He wasn’t doing a very good job here and wished he could call in a substitute to answer the rest of the questions.

Okay, here comes the third one, he thought. Randy was trying to psyche himself up. *Focus buddy, focus.*

“Why is it that you practice religion, if it causes wars?” was the third question.

Crap! Randy didn't see that one coming. *That was a tough question but it's okay though*, he mentally reassured himself. *He would think of a way to deal with it. When the going gets tough, the tough get going,* he encouraged himself.

"Religion gives us guidelines to follow in order to live a better life and it also helps us deal with the fear of death."

Randy shot that answer from the hip. He decided that he had trouble with the previous answers because he was over-thinking them. For the first time, he could find nothing wrong with the answer he had given and that boosted his confidence so that he was anxious to take on the next question.

"Why would you fear death if you had no religion?" was the fourth question and it was a good one.

Randy was determined to shoot from the hip again with hopefully the same successful outcome he'd enjoyed with the last question.

"Fear of the unknown," was his quick and deliberate response and he was just as happy with this answer as he was with the last one. *It took me a while to find my game legs, but I'm just smokin' now*, he congratulated himself.

He was busy imagining the whole world giving him a high five when the final question was asked.

"If you fear death, why would you practice religion, which creates wars and ultimately causes more death?"

The cheering crowds in Randy's imagination went silent. Actually everything in Randy's mind went silent. He could think of no answer, good or bad, to this question. This was like the final minute of a championship game and he had choked!

The frustration was more than he could bare. He sat up in his hammock and reached skyward with his right hand and grasped the tiny ship. He brought it down to just in front of his nose and stared at it for a moment. He then lowered the ship until it was just in front of his mouth and yelled.

"None of your business!"

Noticing that the ship was roughly the same size as a beer can, Randy squeezed it in his hand and heard the same crumpling metallic sound that a beer can makes when you crush it. He then tossed the twisted metal ball at the tiny basketball hoop and it dropped right through the middle and into the garbage can below.

"Swish!" Randy exclaimed, his right arm and index finger extended as if to say "Number One!"

The screen of the little TV flickered and the basketball game returned. Randy reached down into the cooler and retrieved another beer. Pshhsssst… *Ahh Saturday*, he thought.

The sun was just beginning to peak above the houses on Randy's street. It was Monday morning and another long week was beginning. The garbage truck lumbered along as men jumped out, grabbing cans and bags from the curb and dumping them into the back. As one of the men grabbed Randy's garbage can and dumped it, the twisted hull of the tiny interstellar craft fell out of the can and onto the pavement.

"Hey Joe," the man holding the can said, "Its another one of those space toy things. What's that about twelve now we've found all twisted up like that?"

He picked it up and examined it before tossing it into the back of the truck.

"Ya," Joe said. "Must be a crappy toy. Remind me not to get my kid one for Christmas."

Forbidden Zone

The sign read “Absolutely No Admittance By Anyone At Anytime For Any Reason”. *This is the place*, George thought as he squeezed in between the two large gates that blocked the road. Whoever had attached the two gates together, had used too long of a chain so it was possible, by pushing both gates inward, to create enough of a gap for someone to slip through. It was better than the alternative, which was to scale the twelve-foot high fence that was connected to the gates and headed off in both directions.

George had parked his truck on a logging road about a mile to the west. No one would suspect that he’d come this way. At least they never had before.

After wedging himself through the opening in the gate, he rearranged any gear and clothing that had been pulled out of place. As he walked, George checked his rifle to make sure the clip was full and that there was a round in the chamber. He knew how unexpectedly they could appear and he wanted to be ready. A short distance inside the gate, the road deteriorated into little more than a wagon trail, grown over with all manor of underbrush and weeds from lack of use. No one had been down this road in 30 years. Still, George didn’t have the authorization to be in here and he knew it, so he had to be wary of any military aircraft that might fly over.

Soon even the wagon trail of a road George was following disappeared and there was nothing around him but forest. He could calm down a bit now. The heavy canopy of leaves in the treetops gave him good cover so the possibility of being seen from above was pretty much zero. Now he could concentrate on looking for what he'd come here to find and make sure that he saw them before they saw him.

It was a warm day and he soon found himself working up a sweat as he weaved his way carefully through the dense trees, trying to see but not be seen. The forbidden zone covered an area ten miles long by five miles wide and contained different types of forest as the elevation changed. There were

many parts of it where he had never been. He was in one such area today. Movement was even slower in the unfamiliar terrain.

George had been at it for about four hours when he reached the edge of a clearing. The trees no longer obstructed the breeze and it felt refreshing as it blew across his sweat-covered face. He decided that this was a good place to have a rest stop. He had brought one cigar with him, which he took out of his pocket and clenched between his teeth. Reaching into the shirt pocket where he always kept his matches, he was disappointed to find that many of them were damp. His sweat had managed to make its way through three layers of clothes. One by one he struck the paper matches against the rough strip on the back of the matchbook. Finally the first match of the last book sparked and sizzled to life. He quickly put it in front of his cigar and began puffing desperately. The smoke that began coming out of his mouth as he exhaled told him that he had been successful.

He had all but quit smoking almost a year ago. The wife didn't like it and smoking was pretty much becoming an antisocial behavior anyway, so he had finally made the effort. There were certain activities that he just couldn't do without having a smoke though. Playing poker with his buddies was one of them. For some reason drinking beer and playing cards just seemed to go naturally with having a cigar or three. The other time when he had to smoke was on days like today. When he was deer hunting, out in the bush all by himself. With nothing around but nature, leaning back and drawing on a cigar just seemed to melt away every bit of stress or tension.

The sound of a distant aircraft interrupted his relaxation, causing him to sit up and quickly extinguish the beloved smoke that he had worked so hard to light in the first place. He rubbed the end of it against a large rock and slunk back into the bush so he was behind some thicker cover.

The area he was in was his favorite hunting grounds. His father had shown this place to him twenty years earlier and he had been back every year since. For the last nineteen years he'd been back by himself, as his father passed away shortly after their first trip here together. The area used to be used extensively by trappers at the turn of the century on through the Second World War. After that it was taken over by the government and used as a top-secret military base from the mid fifties until the eighties. No one

really knows what went on there. After the Cold War ended in the eighties, the buildings were all dismantled, the base was closed up and as far as anyone knew, it was never used again.

There were many reasons why this was such an excellent place to hunt. The most important of which, was that no one else dared to come past the gate as far as George knew. He had never seen another hunter in the twenty years he'd been coming here. The trappers that used the area before the army took over, had all but eradicated any meat-eating predators and once the big fence was put up, there was no way for any new ones to enter. Because there were no other hunters or predators, the deer populations were incredible. The fence that surrounded the whole base kept the deer from leaving, so their numbers just kept increasing.

Every year he would get a deer and every year he would transport it as far as the main gate. As darkness approached, he would slip up to the gate with his truck, quickly load his deer and head home. No one was ever the wiser. George had kept this location a well-guarded secret. At forty years of age, he was looking forward to at least twenty-five more years of hunting unhindered in this little piece of paradise. He looked forward to telling his son about the place when he was old enough to hunt. It was crucial however, that no one else know about it because once places like this are discovered by more than one or two people, they don't stay secrets for long.

The sound of the aircraft had disappeared completely and George was debating whether to relight his cigar or carry on. The sun had been behind a small cloud and now burst forth causing a warm feeling to wash over George's back and also caused something some fifty yards in front of him to glint. *Something metallic*, George thought, *that's odd*. It was probably the remnants of a tin can left by another hunter. That was disappointing because it meant someone else already knew about this place. George decided to check it out anyway and headed in the direction from which he had seen the bright, reflected light.

As he got closer, George realized that he wouldn't have to worry about this hunter telling anyone, because there he was, leaning with his back against a tree. What was left of him, that is. The remnants of the camouflage clothing the man had been wearing still did its job and made it

difficult to see him until you were very close. If not for the bright, white areas of exposed bone peeking through the brown, dry, leathery skin on the man's face, he would blend into the surroundings perfectly. The camouflage cap, with hair still protruding out from under it, had slumped down over time, as it was now much too large for the skull that held it. The peak of the hat partially obscured the black and empty eye sockets and cast a shadow over the tiny remnants of a nose. The nose, George assumed, which had once supported the eyeglasses now lying next to his body. The man's rifle lay across his lap. The left hand, which still appeared to have it's index finger on the trigger, had a bright, gold, wedding ring on it. George believed that was what had initially reflected the sunlight and grabbed his attention. The thick carpet of leaves that covered the forest floor at this particular spot obscured the legs of the unfortunate fellow.

There were no spruce here, mostly aspen and oak. At this time of year they shed their foliage and the colors and smells that the decomposing leaves added to the forest was one of the things that drew George out here year after year.

The orange hunting vest the man had been wearing was folded up and sat on the ground next to him. George had done this himself when he was back here hunting all alone. He thought the solid color of such apparel made it easier for the deer to see you. Since there were no other hunters, why would he need to wear a bright orange vest?

"If ya gotta go I guess this is as good a place as any," George said aloud to himself as he looked around.

He had often thought that he would like to be buried in this place when he died. So many happy days and weeks spent hunting back here, but getting permission to use this as your final resting-place would probably be a legal impossibility.

He found himself wondering what had killed this poor guy. Judging by his position, George figured the man must have been waiting for a deer with his back against the tree trunk. That was a common tactic that George had used himself on many occasions. The poor fellow probably had an aneurism or stroke and died without even realizing it.

The smell of the decomposing leaves made George realize that there was no smell coming from the body at all, so it must have been here for some time. He was surprised that he wasn't more grossed out than he was. He had never been this close to a dead guy before, except at a funeral. Perhaps because the body was more bone than flesh at this point, that made it seem less than human. Maybe he'd seen too many 'crime scene investigation' type television shows and had become desensitized to the sight of a human corpse.

Feeling a bizarre kinship with the pile of bones that had once been a hunter like himself, George found himself talking to the deceased man in low whispers. Not really expecting an answer, more like just thinking out loud.

"This gun is probably still loaded and cocked so maybe I better take that off your hands, what do ya say?" George reached for the gun but took another look at the wedding ring as he did.

"So you're married eh Bud?" He gently slipped the wedding ring off of the string of bones that had once been the man's finger. As he lifted the ring off the end, the finger came apart in three pieces. "Okay that was pretty disgusting," George whispered.

He knew from watching all of those television crime shows that he shouldn't disturb the scene, but even at this early stage, George somehow knew that he wasn't going to tell anyone about his friend here.

He looked closely at the inside of the ring. "Forever Jan and Red" it said simply.

As he wrapped the ring in his hanky and stowed it safely in his pocket, he mentally ran through the reasons why it was a good idea to keep quiet about this. In the first place, it had obviously been years since this guy went missing so no one is even searching for him anymore. His wife Jan had probably come to grips with his disappearance and had moved on. It would be cruel to dredge up all those feelings again by announcing what he'd found. If there had been any predators left in the area, the bones probably wouldn't have even been here for George to find. He thought that if he had been in this man's position, he would want to be left just as he was for his

final resting-place. It would be like spending an eternity doing what he loved best; sitting against a tree with a gun in his lap.

Deep down George knew that the real reason for not telling anyone was that it would tip everyone off to his hunting area. The police, the news people, everyone would hear about it and he would never have this place to himself again. It made him feel greedy and self-serving. He justified his decision by looking at the man in front of him and imagining that if the situation were reversed and it was George's bones leaning up against that tree, this guy wouldn't have told anyone either.

Having freed the gun from Red's grasp, George opened the action to remove the live round that was no doubt there, so it wouldn't go off by accident. To his surprise, the shell casing that ejected was empty. *Hmm, Red must have squeezed the trigger as he died,* George reasoned as he pictured the man's final moments.

Upon closer inspection, George realized that the clip in the gun was empty as well. *No deer hunter, no matter how good of a shot he is, only puts one bullet in the gun. He must have fired them all off. If he emptied his gun shooting at something, then there should be some spent shell casings right here,* George thought and began brushing back the thick layer of leaves beside Red. A familiar 'klinking' noise immediately accompanied the rustling of the leaves he was moving. He soon realized what the noise was when he discovered the empty shell casings which completely covered the ground underneath the leaves. He didn't know what to think about his discovery. The empty boxes and plastic holders, which had once contained more ammunition only added to the mystery. George quickly counted over forty empty shell casings in this one tiny spot. Red had not only emptied his gun shooting at something, but he had reloaded several times and emptied it each time, using up all the ammunition he'd been carrying.

What the hell was he shooting at? George looked in the direction that Red appeared to be facing and there were no hints or clues as to what he might have been aiming at.

It suddenly occurred to him, that Red must have a deer license or a wallet in his possession somewhere. If nothing else, he could find out what Red's real name was and where he was from. The longer he knelt next to

the skeleton in front of him the more he thought of Red as a man instead of a corpse. The guilt was starting to get the better of him. He thought maybe the right thing to do was to mail the wallet and wedding ring back to his wife discreetly, saying he had just found them in the woods.

He reached under the body to where he assumed the back pants pocket would be and felt the familiar shape of a wallet. While he was struggling to free it from the partially decomposed pants pocket, a horrified George watched as the head became detached and rolled down Red's chest, finally landing in the skeleton's bony lap.

The hat knocked off, the dark empty eye sockets looked directly at George and he felt the goose bumps start on his arms and spread to cover his entire body. It wasn't the blank look from a dead man's empty eyes that caused a knot of fear to form in his stomach. It was the bullet hole that was now evident in the center of Red's forehead that caused him to gasp. *Had Red been in a shoot out with someone?*

Maybe there were people living in this area who wanted to stay hidden. Of course, that had to be it! If someone ever wanted to just disappear, what better place to go? Maybe, George thought, *the military was still using the base and Red had "seen too much"*. Many different scenarios raced through his mind from a hunting partner shooting Red so he could run off with his wife, to secret government UFO conspiracies. He didn't care who Red was anymore and left the wallet where it was.

All he could think of now, was getting the hell out of there and back to his truck. He quickly took out his compass and got his bearings. He wanted to make a bee-line for the main gate. George's readings told him the direction in which he needed to go in order to reach the gate in the least amount of time. He quickly packed up his compass and picked up his gun.

He stepped over Red's legs and was about to start walking as quickly as he could, when his leg suddenly disappeared into the ground. It took a moment to realize that his right leg was now jammed into a deep hole. His left leg, still above ground, was bent and his knee rested on the ground next to it. He had to put his hand out to the side to keep from falling over and snapping his leg off at the knee.

We wiggled his right foot and tried to remove his leg from the hole. It felt as though the hole was slightly tapered, getting narrower toward the bottom. When he tried to pull his foot out, he found that it was being held in some kind of device. There was a small piece of what looked like window screen, left at the top of the opening. This must have been over the hole and covered with leaves thought George. He could hear what sounded like a chain clinking at the bottom of the hole when he moved his foot. Whatever it was, would only allow him to lift his foot about three inches. Because it was such a tight fit, he couldn't even get his hand down along side of his leg to feel what was happening.

He began moving leaves and branches around the area where his leg disappeared into the ground to get a better look. As he moved some of the leaves which covered Red's legs, he stopped and looked in terrified disbelief. There was a similar hole and in it was the left leg of the deceased hunter . Red had been leaning back against the tree with one leg straight out and the other in a hole just like the one that now held George's leg. The mysteries just kept piling up!

Next to the hole that held Red's leg, George could see the blade of a knife sticking out from under the leaves. He moved more of them to get a better look and realized that Red had been using the knife to dig down along his leg to get at whatever was holding his foot. *What a great idea!* thought George.

"Thanks Red!" he whispered.

It's too bad that whoever shot Red, found him before he finished freeing his foot. George used Red's knife and began hacking at the ground, staying a safe distance away from his leg.

As he did, he wondered what these holes were. *Perhaps some old trapper had used a set like this to catch timber wolves so the animal couldn't chew his leg off. Maybe these were set by the military to catch intruders and keep them alive for interrogation. Perhaps these were something new, set by people that were trying to remain hidden in the forbidden zone.* It didn't really matter. The bottom line was that he had to get his foot free and his leg out of the hole before he ended up like Red, with a bullet in his face.

He stopped every few seconds to look in all directions and would then continue digging. He was making good progress and in no time was four or five inches down. Suddenly, the knife struck something hard. He scratched around with the blade and discovered that it was a large flat stone. Oh well, he thought, he would just move over, start again and dig down beside the stone. Four times George restarted digging and four times he ended up at a large flat rock that blocked his progress.

Frustrated and getting more scared by the minute, he tried to calm himself down and reason a way out of this. He took the remaining bit of cigar from his pocket and clenched it in his teeth. Retrieving the last remaining book of matches from his pocket, he began striking them one by one until the last one sputtered and sprung to life.

He puffed on his smoke for a few minutes while he looked around for anything that would give him an idea of what to try next. He looked at the hole Red was stuck in and noticed the leg of Red's pants had been cut off just above where his knee would have been. The bones that made up the lower portion of his leg were clearly visible just below ground level.

"You're brilliant Red!" he said out loud.

Red had apparently cut the heavy leg off of his hunting pants in the hope that it would give him enough room to get his hand down along the side of his leg and free up his foot. George crushed his cigar into the ground beside him and began doing likewise. It wasn't long before he realized that this wasn't going to work either because there just wasn't enough room to cut the pant leg further down past the rocks that had blocked him earlier.

Then George had an idea. He could look down the hole that Red was stuck in and discover what was at the bottom. Once he knew what was holding Red's foot, he might be able to devise a way to free himself. He reached the short distance over and grabbed Red's leg, just below where the pants had been cut off. The leg easily came apart and George found himself holding Red's shinbone. He tried to lean over and look down the hole but it was just a little too far away, which made it impossible.

As he twisted to lay the bone on the ground, something weird about it caught his eye. At the part that would have made up Red's knee was a

bunch of parallel lines in the bone. *What were those all about?* he wondered as he held the bone up to the sky to get more light and a better look.

It was then that he noticed something. Something that he wished he had seen before. It took him a minute to put all the pieces together but the sudden realization of what had actually happened to Red threw him into a panic. He dropped Red's leg bone and began frantically pulling on his leg and scratching at the ground like a caged animal until he was so exhausted he could do no more.

He slumped forward and thought again about what he'd seen. When George had held the bones skyward, he saw the many bullet tracks running up along the trunk of Red's tree and the remnants of many branches that had been shot right off. Red wasn't shooting at anything. He had used his ammo to try and signal someone to come and help him.

When that didn't work, he had to try something else. He hadn't been trying to dig down along the side of his leg as George had thought. Red had been removing dirt so he could reach a few inches lower in the hole to where his knee was. He hadn't cut his pant leg off, he had been trying to cut his leg off! Those parallel lines in the bone were marks from his knife, now extremely dull from digging in the dirt. With every cut he must have tried desperately to find the joint. Without a saw of some kind, that would have been the only way to remove the lower part of his leg and crawl to freedom. This must have been his last resort.

George shuddered at the thought of how hungry and frightened you would have to be to try and cut your own leg off. Finally, being unable to do it, Red had used his last remaining bullet to end his suffering. There never had been anyone else in these woods and with a heavy feeling in his chest, George realized that there wouldn't be anytime soon.

He took stock of his supplies. He had used his last match to light his cigar so he couldn't make a signal fire; not that he could go gather wood to make one anyway. He had enough water for the rest of the day, maybe two if he was very frugal. Food consisted of only a chocolate bar and a sandwich. Because the hunting was so easy here, George had brought only one box of twenty cartridges with him. As he counted, piled and arranged his belongings off to the side where he could reach them, he eventually

came across his hunting knife. He removed it from its sheath and rubbed his thumb across the blade to check the edge. It was still very sharp and he returned it to the sheath so it would stay that way.

After a moment of thought, he picked up his rifle and pulled the bolt back. He picked up the full cartridge that was ejected, and placed it in the top pocket of his hunting coat, all by itself. He chambered another round and pointed his rifle skyward, firing three evenly spaced shots as all the hunting manuals tell you to do when you're in trouble. What the manuals don't tell you, is that every hunter that hears three shots, assumes someone is shooting at a running deer and not having much luck. George didn't think he was going to have much luck either. He had a sinking feeling that he and Red were going to have even more in common than just hunting.

The Experiment

Heidi's eyes snapped full open with the sudden realization that she was no longer in her bedroom. She raised her hand to her forehead to shield her now squinting eyes from the bright light far above her. The floor she was lying on was metallic, but it felt warm and her ears were filled with a low pitched, barely audible hum. Still clad in her flannel pajamas, she slowly rose to her feet. The round room she was in was quite large and the single light overhead, although bright, was focused more toward the center of the room and left the outer wall dark and featureless.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she became aware of 3 other people in the room with her. They too were moving slowly, examining their surroundings and looking just as disoriented as she felt. As if by instinct, their movements slowly brought them all to the center of the room where it was the brightest. She could now clearly see that there was another woman, with dark hair also wearing pajamas and two men. One clad in only a ratty pair of Grey sweat pants and the other in what looked like some kind of uniform with a light blue shirt and dark blue pants.

The other woman was the first to speak. "Okay, I give up. Where the hell are we?"

The man in the uniform, still straining to see what was at the outer reaches of the light replied, "I don't know, but that's the last time I take a nap at work."

"So I take it we were all sleeping before being brought here?" Everyone looked at the man in the grey sweat pants. He slowly rubbed his forehead with one hand while staring intently at the floor, clearly trying to make sense of what was happening. He continued, "Maybe this is some kind of common, collective dream or something?"

"Naw, it feels too real." The other woman pointed out as she slowly turned a complete revolution scanning the entire outer wall. Heidi's heart was no longer racing. Wherever she was and however she got there, at least she was not alone and she was grateful for that.

A mechanical clunk preceded the appearance of a second light. This one was a more focused, cone-shaped, pure white light that was projected down from above and illuminated a circle slightly larger than a manhole cover, on the floor a few feet in front of them. Suspended in this cone of light was what could best be described as a 3 dimensional shadow of a human figure from the waist up. It was totally black with no details whatsoever. While still coming to grips with this being's unexpected appearance, the four became aware of a voice. Not in their ears but in their minds. A very deep, clear voice which pushed aside all other thoughts and feelings until *It* was all that remained.

"Do not concern yourselves with where you are or how you came to be here", the voice began. "Know only that two of you shall remain here as subjects in our experimentation and the other two shall be returned exactly as you were." The voice stopped and the four were again able to think.

The man in the sweat pants stepped forward. "So basically you are going to send two of us home and torture the other two?"

The voice returned, "Your essence shall be removed from your body prior to the experimentation. There will be no pain."

The man in the uniform, when he was again able to speak, whispered in a voice cracking with fear, "If he's gonna kill two of us why doesn't he just say that?"

The Voice began again, "The task before us is to determine who will be spared. There are certain human traits we deem desirable in our experimentation and this shall be the criteria used for the selection of our test subjects."

The four captives could say nothing in their defense. The total lack of the ability to think or feel anything while the voice was in their heads and the sudden inrush of thoughts and feelings when it stopped, made it impossible to fully comprehend the situation much less do anything about it. The *Being* stretched out his shadowy hand toward the other woman in the pajamas. Her scalp began tingling and waves of tiny electric shocks cascaded through her body from head to toe and then stopped.

“You are known as Twilla”, the voice began. The shadowy figure tilted it’s head to the side. “You are a logical thinker, confident, but I sense that you are unpredictable even to yourself. A complex personality.”

The Being turned sideways until his outstretched hand was directed at the man in the uniform. The man’s body convulsed slightly as the energy waves passed through him.

The Voice continued, “You are called Tim. You are intelligent, curious and very analytical but you lack self discipline, and focus.”

The hand moved in the other direction, across the group to where Heidi was standing. The pulsing sensations made it feel like every hair on her head was standing up. “Heidi”, the voice paused, “You see life differently than most of your kind. I sense intelligence, humor, inquisitiveness and you do not judge others.”

The Being turned back to the center of the group and aimed his outstretched hand at the man in the grey sweatpants. As his only available act of defiance, he tried to counter the involuntary muscle contractions as the shock waves raced from his head to his feet and back again, all the while staring intently at where the being’s eyes would be… if it had any.

“You are identified as Michael. You seem strangely calm given your situation. Hmmm, honesty, intelligence, and a certain amount of humor I sense in you but also irritability and impatience.”

The figure retracted his outstretched arm. Again they heard a mechanical clunk and the cone of white light with the shadow inside was gone. Michael rubbed his temples hard with the palms of his hands as if trying to re-order his mind now that he was able to do so.

“This is like the worst job interview ever,” was all he could think of to say.

Twilla took a deep breath. The panic that had overwhelmed her was quickly being taken over by a defiant rage. “Who are these things and what gives them the right?” she blurted out.

Heidi gripped one hand in the other, trying to stop either of them from shaking. Her mind was a buzz as her whole life seemed to flash before her eyes.

Is this where it ends, she thought? *Has it all been for nothing?*

She replayed her life in her head again. Anything to keep her mind from guessing what might happen next.

Tim, now in control of his faculties once again, was frantically analyzing what little information he had gathered since waking up here. He constructed one scenario after another in the hope that one of them would point the way to a favorable conclusion to whatever this was. They all ended the same. Having no control, he would just have to let this play out and hopefully some options to control the outcome would surface later on.

As with most stressful situations he thought, *I wonder if you can smoke in here?*

Michael began pacing; slowly at first then with more intensity. He would pause briefly to look around and then resume, like a caged animal. Like Tim, he too had come to the conclusion that there was nothing to be done, but wait.

He spoke but it was as if he was thinking out loud. "Why don't they just get it over with?"

A rapid series of mechanical noises jolted the four back to the situation at hand. Six windows had appeared in the outer wall, evenly spaced around the entire circumference of the room. The six windows were identical and consisted of a pane of glass behind which was an illuminated cubicle. The cubicles had white walls and each contained a dark human-like figure similar to the one the group had encountered earlier. A voice in their heads, similar to the first but not quite as deep, again filled their minds as if coming from all directions.

"Twilla" the voice paused, "Why do you think your behavior is sometimes so unpredictable?"

Twilla, her rage now ripe and ready for picking slowly turned so she could face all six of the shadowy figures in turn. She bent slightly forward and clenched her fists by her sides. Her voice grew louder as she spoke.

"I dunno, maybe it could have something to do with being dragged out of my bed in the middle of the night and being threatened with having", she made quotation marks in the air with her fingers, "my essence removed!"

“Tim,” the voice continued, “you feel you lack self discipline and focus.” Tim cut him off with a nervous stutter, “I know…I know, but I’m gonna work on that…right away…tomorrow.”

A new voice now, somewhat softer than the first but just as mentally disrupting. “Heidi...why do you view life so differently than others?”

Heidi didn’t care about their questions or their experiments. With an unintended urgency she could only choke out the same three sentences that had begun repeating themselves in her thoughts.

“I’ve never done anything to anybody! I just want to live! Leave me alone, I just want to be left alone!”

The deeper voice returned again, “Michael, we find it interesting that someone who is so calm and with much humor should be so impatient and irritable?”

Michael, who had stopped pacing when the windows first appeared, thought for a moment, “So a priest a rabbi and a duck walk into a bar”…he paused a very long time, looking at each window in turn as he slowly moved his head from left to right. Realizing that there were times for levity, but this probably wasn’t one of them he started again, “I guess I get frustrated in situations where I have no control. Like now for example. I have a family that depends on me and I don’t know if I’m going to be there for them in the morning. Can we just get on with it?”

The windows vanished with the same clunk that heralded their appearance. The first cone of light had simultaneously returned and the shadowy figure inside sat silent. Michael came back to join the group in the center of the room.

This time when the being spoke it was as a normal voice that permeated the room instead of their heads. “The choice has been made!” it proclaimed. As it spoke two cylindrical beams of blue light descended from above. One encompassed Twilla, the other Tim. Their bodies immediately became stiff and their eyes locked in a wide open stare.

“Twilla and Tim”, the voice announced, “shall be returned”.

With that, the blue cylinders spun into a tornado of light and then vanished along with the occupants. Michael and Heidi stood frozen, their

hearts beating faster and louder, terrified of what was about to happen.

The Voice began, “You have been spared along with one hundred others of your kind to participate in the next phase of our experiment.”

Heidi and Michael looked at each other and then at the Being, “Spared? Spared from what?” Heidi whispered.

With a wave of his hand the Shadow summoned a large window on one side of the room. They could see the bright blue planet Earth below. Another motion from the Being’s hand and the view of the planet began magnifying, bringing them in closer and closer until they could see that large areas where lush forests had once stood had been burned and charred black. Where major cities had once been, there was only rubble and the jagged remnants of some tall buildings.

“Time does not proceed at the same rate aboard this vessel as it does on your world. In the twenty minutes you’ve been with us, twenty years have passed on the planet below. In response to some perceived threat, your leaders have unleashed a nuclear exchange, which quickly escalated and will in a very short time, result in your planet being totally devoid of life of any kind. Many times we have seeded similar planets with the essence of your beings, and always the same result. As we have done in the past, we have selected a group whose core characteristics will be used as seed for the next planet and the next phase of our experiment. Eventually we hope to arrive at a species which will allow itself to grow and develop to a higher level closer to our own. In previous attempts, we have used subjects with too much aggression and ambition. Heidi, you were selected because we sensed a great love and respect for life; Michael, because of your honesty and devotion to your family unit. Your essence will be inserted into new biological assemblies and you will have no recollection of anything prior to that. Your existence will start anew on a planet very similar to your own when it was young.”

Heidi and Michael felt light headed. A floating sensation enveloped them and as they looked down and saw their lifeless bodies slump to the floor they heard the voice conclude, “And the experiment will continue.”

Witching Hour

What the hell are we doing here? I thought to myself as we picked our way through the weathered tombstones that surrounded the old stone church.

The crisp dry leaves that covered the ground and the light wind that whipped them into swirling bowls of rustling foliage, seemed to whisper to us and tell us to be silent. “Shhhhh,” it said as we neared the stone steps in front of the old building.

The white mortar around the huge rocks in the church wall seemed to glow in the moonlight as we approached the heavy wooden door. Cindy clutched my arm tightly in both of her hands as we climbed the two steps to the entrance. Wanda was already at the door and was reaching for the large metal handle.

“Maybe we should go,” Cindy blurted out. “It’s already 11:30 and I told my mom I’d be home by 12:00.”

“Awe ya big chicken!” Wanda shot back and then turned to face Cindy. She leaned toward her putting her face closer and closer as she spoke with a hoarse whisper. “Besides, midnight on Halloween is when the veils between the physical and the spirit worlds are so thin that the dead and the living are almost in the same dimension. Time and space become intertwined and anything can happen.” She paused, then let loose a mischievous giggle.

Wanda fancied herself a modern day witch. She was always reading something about the occult, or muttering some kind of incantation to herself as she passed by people. Her hair and clothes were always black and she would draw weird symbols on her hands and sometimes on her face depending on the time of year. If it was a ploy to appear mysterious and get attention, then it worked. At least among the girls in our school. The other guys and myself found it a bit weird and kind of a turn-off. I guess that’s why she never had a boyfriend. It was no surprise that she showed up at my

friend's Halloween party dressed as a witch, with a huge pentagram drawn in the middle of her forehead.

Cindy looked so cute in her flowered dress and bonnet. We had gone to the Halloween party dressed as a frontier couple and I must say the costume suited her to a tee. Me, not so much. I looked like I was on the way to audition for the Beverly Hillbillies with my floppy hat, white shirt and tattered vest, complete with a plastic replica of a muzzle-loading rifle.

The party was pretty boring so Cindy and I were gonna leave when Wanda asked if she could catch a ride home. It was on our way so I felt I had to say yes, although Cindy and I really wanted to be alone for a while before I had to take her home.

While we were driving, Wanda told the story of the haunted church outside of town. I'd heard something about it from my Grand Dad but that was just a story to tell around the campfire I thought. Wanda on the other hand seemed quite wrapped up in it and knew all of the details. Cindy had been hanging on every word and getting quite excited herself, as Wanda told the tail of the two ghosts, which had haunted the old church for over a century.

According to Wanda, the church records spoke of a young couple who had died during an epidemic in the mid 1800's. Their spirits had appeared in front of the whole congregation during their funeral. Forty-four people and the preacher all saw them. Suddenly one of Satan's demons had appeared and tried to take the souls of the young couple. The preacher did battle with the demon and finally destroyed him by throwing holy water on him and casting him back to hell. Again, all of this was witnessed by the entire congregation and is recorded in the church logs.

Sadly, because the souls of the couple had been touched by evil, they could no longer ascend to heaven and the preacher had prevented them from going to hell so they were now earth-bound spirits. The were trapped here for all eternity and that's why they have remained in the church for over a hundred years.

It was quite a story and I'll admit the hair on my neck was standing up as Wanda was telling it. Cindy was almost in tears at the thought of the poor couple left all alone in the church for so long. When Wanda suggested we

go there right now, the last thing I expected was for Cindy to agree...but she did. She was so compassionate about all living things (and apparently dead things as well) that I don't think she realized what she was agreeing to.

Now that we were there, she was clearly having second thoughts but it was too late. To back out now meant being branded as cowards by all our classmates as Wanda would no doubt tell a different tale of how we got to the church door and then ran back to the car like scared mice. I kept telling myself that this ghost story was only a fable and we would be in and out of the church in no time. *Let's just get it over with,* I thought as I reached for the big metal handle myself.

The door opened with a long croaking groan and the noise echoed throughout the inside of the church. The full moon cast an ominous light through the large stained glass windows that lined both walls. It took a moment for our eyes to adjust but in short order we could see well enough to navigate through the old wooden pews.

We slowly inched our way up the center isle, while the floorboards creaked with every step. That tingling I felt on my neck in the car had spread and now it felt like every hair on my head was about to jump to attention. Cindy was still squeezing my arm so tight that my fingers were getting numb.

I looked around as we moved. I could see the large heavy beams across the high ceiling. There was a raised area at the front of the church, much like a low stage and to one side of it, a small wooden structure with a slanted top. I assumed that's where the preacher stood while delivering his fiery sermons about sin and damnation. On the opposite side of the stage area was a rough rickety looking table with a drawer.

We arrived at the front and ascended the two steps up to the stage area. My heart was returning to its normal rate and I felt as though I could breathe again. *So far so good, maybe we could leave now,* I hoped. I was not to be so lucky.

Wanda all of a sudden sat down cross-legged in the middle of the stage facing the rows of empty wooden pews. She closed her eyes and placed her hands, palms up, on her knees and began one of her incantations. This was

getting too weird. I wasn't aware of it before but my knees had been shaking and now they shook harder and began to hurt already.

Wanda's voice became louder and we could hear what she was saying, but I'd wished we couldn't.

"Spirits of this holy place,"

"Let us see your earthly face."

"Spirits that are on this ground,"

"Let us hear your earthly sound."

She paused for a moment and took a deep breath, which made me wish that I could. My breathing was more akin to hyperventilating and I think Cindy had stopped breathing altogether. Before we could tell Wanda to knock it off, she began again in a loud voice that boomed and echoed throughout the entire building and the surprise almost made my legs buckle.

"As the witching hour draws near," she began, "we wish to look through the veils of time and space that separate the physical and spirit worlds. Show us the souls that have inhabited this place. Let us hear your words so that we may know your plight."

I thought I was on the verge of passing out or fainting as her voice seemed to quickly move farther and farther away, while another voice seemed to come closer and get louder. It was the voice of a man, and he was speaking with a great deal of intensity, getting louder and louder until I could no longer hear Wanda's voice at all.

It seemed to be coming from the little wooden stand to one side of the stage and when I turned my head that way, I could see tiny wisps of white light which swirled and coalesced into the shape of a tall man wearing a long coat. The entire figure was white, but transparent and as the voice became clearer, it was apparent that it was a sermon of some kind.

Something caught the corner of my eye and as I turned to face the back of the church again, I saw similar forms inhabiting the wooden benches that filled the church. There were dim white figures of men, women and children all facing the tall specter at the pulpit.

I looked down and in front of the stage were the ghostly images of two long boxes. As the witching hour approached and the images became brighter, I could see that they were coffins with a young man in one and a young woman in the other.

Suddenly, a female voice overtook the emotional rantings of the ghostly figure that was giving the sermon.

“I see their souls father!” the voice was loud, panicked and quite clear.

I lifted my head to see one of the ghostly images in the first row of benches staring and pointing right at Cindy and me. I couldn’t have run if I tried. My feet felt like they weighed a hundred pounds each and my knees were almost banging together. It was cold in the stone church but my shirt was becoming drenched in sweat. All the transparent figures in the church, including the tall one on the stage with us, were silently staring in our direction.

A hand suddenly grabbed my shoulder and I gasped. It was Wanda. She had finally opened her eyes and was looking at the glowing specters with more dread than I ever hope to see in anyone’s face, ever again.

“Let’s get out of here!” she said in a trembling voice, grabbing my sleeve and trying to pull me along with her, but I couldn’t move.

I finally understand what frozen with fear means.

“The devil is trying to take them father!” the spirit woman in the front row yelled again, now pointing at Wanda.

The tall white figure at the pulpit took two giant steps and he was right beside us. Wanda turned in his direction just as the preacher stretched out his hand to within an inch of the pentagram on her face and yelled, “BE GONE DEMON!” “IN THE NAME OF GOD I BANISH YOU BACK TO HELL!”

She fainted dead away. Landing in a crumpled heap on the rough boards of the stage on which we stood. I heard a symphony of gasps from the church pews.

My wristwatch beeped twice, signaling Twelve midnight and the white transparent specters dissolved like steam from a kettle. We stood there in

the deafening quiet and the semi darkness for a moment. I reached down and grabbed Wanda's arm and helped her to her feet.

Cindy, who was crying and still clutching my arm stuttered, "Can we get the hell out of here?"

Wanda now a little more composed headed for the huge door at the back of the church, bouncing off the ends of the benches as she ran to the exit. I followed, as fast as I could while half-dragging Cindy beside me. The large wooden door didn't feel as heavy this time as we threw it open and made a bee-line for the car.

Thankfully we hadn't locked the doors because the way my hands were shaking, I never would have been able to get the key in the lock to open them. The cars engine roared to life and I immediately dropped it into gear and pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor. It was several miles before I backed off on the accelerator and let the car slow down to the speed limit.

The rest of the ride home was pretty quiet except for a few sniffles from Wanda in the back seat. Cindy just stared out the window and kept winding her finger around one strap of her bonnet again and again.

The next day at school, everyone was talking about different parties they had been to or how they had to take their little brothers or sisters trick or treating. There was no point in telling anyone what we had seen. Who would believe us?

Wanda came into the class and everyone stopped talking. She had dyed her hair blonde and was wearing a pink skirt and a while blouse. There were no strange symbols on her hands or her face and the only incantation she was reciting as she passed by people on the way to her seat, was "Good Morning…Good Morning."

EERIE
Tales of
the Bizarre